

Dilemma

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In those last fatal fleeting years, they called themselves Ernest and Maida. Stupid names, and he'd told them so. He'd warned them, time and time again; had done his best to dissuade them, but they wouldn't listen. They had been seduced by aliens and their primitive ways, high on love and the thrill of rebellion. He knew all about the thrill of rebellion; he also knew the wages of sin, and he'd warned them. But they hadn't listened. No one ever listened to him.

Ernest and Maida had been his friends. At least, he'd considered them as such. And now they were dead.

And now he was being asked to kill their daughter.

"It can't be necessary to kill the girl," he argued.

"Don't be a fool," They told him. "She's manifested the powers. Do you think we can simply let her run around loose?"

"Who's saying to let her run loose? We can easily enough neutralize any threat she prevents. Why don't You simply take the powers away? You were eager enough to take mine. She wouldn't even consider it a punishment."

"And then what happens the next time someone decides to make unauthorized offspring? Do we want infants of our kind springing up everywhere, parents secure in the knowledge that if the children don't work out, we'll simply let them live out their lives in peace? We need to make an example."

"Politics," he snarled under his breath, contemptuously. It all came down to politics in the end, didn't it?

He was not popular, neither among aliens nor his own kind. That he was unloved among other races was to be expected, given his work and his role. The reasons for his lack of friends among his own kind were more complex. It might have something to do with what had happened to his best friend, three hundred years ago. The two had had a devastating falling-out, leaving him scarred and her... well, no one really wanted to think about what had happened to her. And so perhaps no one wanted to risk coming close to him, and perhaps he didn't want to risk coming close to them. Or perhaps it was his role. He himself was of that opinion. He was a devil's advocate, a passionate opponent of whatever anyone else believed in, and his integrity in his duties had always been impeccable. A person whose profession, vocation, avocation is that of the loyal opposition is difficult to love.

There was also his contempt for politics, and his outspoken challenges to authority, in a society where hierarchy controlled everything. He made few alliances, and fewer friends, that way. After his closest friend had tried to kill him, and after what he'd done to her in response, he contented himself with his work and the amusements it could give him.

Some said his amusements had become excessive, had changed from the ruthless compassion demanded by his work to the sadism of a torturer. Some said he was too outspoken, too rebellious, too willing to challenge authority. Some said he was far too arrogant for one so young- his people were supposed to be arrogant, but there were limits. Others simply didn't like him. He made little attempt to be liked, after all. It was politics that had brought him down, had sent him spiraling down in the esteem of his society. He had been hurt, humiliated, exiled- almost _killed_- by what amounted to politics. In a very short time, he had learned a depth of bitterness he hadn't known he could know. He had learned fear.

"Simply because you are too immature to comprehend the necessity of the political-"

"Oh, I comprehend it, all right. I just despise it. And why me? Ernest and Maida were my friends."

"Inasmuch as you have friends."

He smiled sardonically, far too thick-skinned to let the accusation hurt, even though it was true. "Inasmuch," he acknowledged.

"You have knowledge of the species she's been raised among."

That was true enough, ironic as it was. Ernest and Maida had been seduced by an alien race, enticed into a life they were not compatible with. Dreaming of a freedom possible only to primitives, they had disobeyed, and thrown their lives away. Even he had been forced to cast his vote for their termination. They knew the laws, the reasoning behind their sentence. They had disobeyed direct orders, and so had to die.

He had been bitterly enraged with the alien race that lured them to their death, then. He had seen them through mud-colored glasses,

seeing only the evil and harshness in their history. He had plotted humiliations for the species, had devised tests too cruel for any sentient species to pass, and judgements too harsh for any species to bear.

But his anger had cooled in the fifteen years it had taken him to find time for it. And he had, despite himself, found the race fascinating. A curious mixture of arrogance and humility, they declared that they were one of the species with greatest potential and then excused one another by saying they were only human. They manifested advanced virtues far before it was safe for them. Like snowflakes, they were beautiful and unutterably fragile, and he could no longer find it in his heart to condemn them for Ernest and Maida's fate. There was some other power to blame there. And slowly, surely, he was forced into a recognition of what that power was.

When politics had dragged him down and his own people had betrayed him to die, those had sheltered him, despite their uncomprehending anger at his tests, despite the fact that doing so threatened one of their incredibly self-important little missions of mercy and through it, their lives. He had been overwhelmed, knowing he would never have the strength to show the kind of compassion they did as long as he was as powerless as them. He tried to tell himself it was because he could not be as innocent, as naive, as they were... but they knew compassion was dangerous. They understood danger better than he did, who had so rarely truly faced it. The fact was that by their standards he was a coward.

It was bad enough to be sentenced to die, bad enough to be stripped of the ability to do the work that gave his life meaning- to say nothing of the sheer physical trauma he was now subject to. But to know that he was a coward, and that his cowardice might destroy these fragile people, was too much. He had offered up his life for theirs- which, though he couldn't have known it at the time, was the best thing he could have done. There were those agitating for him to be forgiven. He had allies of principle. It was simply friends he didn't have.

So now he was back, and faced with a cruel dilemma. He was not fully reinstated; there were things he was required to do to "prove" his worthiness, and this was one of them. Kill Ernest and Maida's child, herself a bridge between that fragile species and his own- an entirely preventable death caused by politics. Or refuse, and give his enemies an excuse to have him destroyed.

"How stupid do You think I am?" he asked. "You can't hide Your true reasons from me."

"You're free to draw whatever conclusions you like, as long as you carry through your orders."

He shook his head. "No."

"Are you refusing Us?"

"Merely pointing out that You're being idiots. If the child deserved death- if it was at all advantageous to kill her- we should have eliminated her with her parents. No. If she's one of us, then she deserves the same chance we give our own children. After all, if she joins us of her own free will, she can hardly be a danger, can she?"

And if it's not offered, people are going to know the death was political. Even Your positions aren't unassailable. It has to be framed in a context. She has to be given a test."

"Of course you'd say that."

"Of course I would. That doesn't make it any less true. If You wanted someone who would do Your dirty work and never question, why did You create me as I am?"

They considered. He thought his chances were reasonably good. His argument was cogent, and if They'd selected him for this They had to have considered that he'd try to talk Them out of it. So They were likely to be open to the possibility.

"Very well," They said. "Persuade her to come of her own free will, and she will be inducted into the Continuum as any of our children. But it must be her choice, entirely. No coercion of any sort."

He grinned. This was better than he'd expected. "That's fair."

"Keep in mind that you failed at this once."

They had to remind him of that. He scowled. "Don't interfere with me this time, and I won't fail. She'll come back with me. I guarantee it."

"And if she does not..."

His eyes narrowed. "If she doesn't, I'll worry about it when the time comes."

"If she doesn't, you'll kill her."

"Yes, yes! Very well! You want me to say it? If she refuses to come to the Continuum, I'll kill her. Happy now?"

"Yes," They said, and left him.

As They left, he understood quite how precarious his situation was, then. If the girl refused, he would have to kill her, or else risk being destroyed for disobedience himself. And yet, if he let the threat of dissolution keep him from defying an authority he knew to be in the wrong, his position as the incorruptible, unsilenceable loyal opposition would be forever compromised. And he would be painted as a murderer of children, and fewer voices would be raised in his defense when he inevitably came to conflict with politics again. Either way, if the girl refused, it would eventually, inevitably, lead to his destruction.

So. He would just have to make sure she didn't refuse, wouldn't he?

With the speed of thought, he located the girl and departed. She was now with the humans he knew best. In a sense, that made things more difficult- they might take it into their heads to argue against him, out of mistrust. That was almost amusing- that they would end up playing his role, the devil's advocate, against him.

But he couldn't let that stop him. He had to persuade the girl to

come with him. Whatever it took.

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